

# Introduction: Defining the Problem

By [Hershel Shanks](#)

Our topic is one of the hottest buttons in biblical studies and is of enormous public interest. One sign of this public interest is that two books on the subject were recently reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times*. When was the last time you can remember a book being reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times*? One of those books was written by Dom Crossan, who is one of our lecturers.

We have given this symposium a rather exciting subtitle, “Modern Scholarship Looks at the Gospels.” But scholars refer to the subject as historical Jesus studies. In short, what do modern historians say about the birth, life and death of Jesus?

Critical scholarship of the New Testament is barely 200 years old. The first book to deal with the New Testament in a critical scholarly way was published in 1778. It was written by a German scholar named Samuel Reimarus. Interestingly, it was not published until ten years after the author died, and even then, it was published anonymously. This gives you some idea of how dangerous it was to engage in this kind of inquiry at that time. The fears of the publisher and the author’s family were not entirely unjustified. At about the same time, Thomas Paine’s publisher in England went to jail for publishing *The Age of Reason*. And in 1697, an 18-year-old Scottish student was hanged for claiming that Ezra, rather than Moses, wrote the Pentateuch.

The most famous work in the history of historical Jesus studies is, of course, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* by Albert Schweitzer, published in the early 20th century. And that really marks the second phase in historical Jesus studies. But scholars soon decided that Schweitzer had been unsuccessful in his quest and that the task was impossible. We could not know the historical Jesus.

After Schweitzer, there was a kind of hiatus on the subject. There are fads in scholarship just as there are in the width of men’s ties. Probably mostly for theological reasons that we don’t have the time to explore here, there was little interest in the quest for the historical Jesus once the second wave led by Schweitzer failed.

But in the last ten or twenty years, interest in this subject has burgeoned. That is why we are here today. We are now in the floodtide of the third phase of historical Jesus studies. One reason for the renaissance is that an enormous amount of new material is now available—archaeological finds, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi Codices, new perspectives on excavating literary texts and new anthropological perspectives concerning the social world in which Jesus lived.

Two aspects of our subject are especially sensitive, and I want to lay those on the table at the outset. We Americans are justly proud of our tolerance for ideas and beliefs that we may not share, but we don't discuss them much because they are not things you talk about in polite society. Today we are going to consider some controversial ideas in a scholarly way, and I want to address them frankly. The first is the factual historicity of the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, life and death. Are there things in the gospels that scholars believe are historically inaccurate? The second sensitive issue is anti-Jewish, perhaps even anti-Semitic, passages in the New Testament. These, too, will be a concern, both explicitly and implicitly.

As to the first question—the factual historicity of the gospel accounts—we need to distinguish the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. We are going to deal here with the former, not the latter. We are going to look at the gospel accounts objectively, as critical, modern historians.

There is, of course, another perfectly legitimate way of addressing these documents. Christians belong to a faith community, and faith, by definition, is not subject to objective scientific verification. Faith deals with ultimate questions, things that are beyond the testable, the empirical or the provable by reason. So we will not speak here of questions of faith. Those questions are for each of us to answer. Each of us must also decide how our faith intersects with what we judge to be the most likely historical scenario.

For many people, critical study of the New Testament deepens and enriches faith. Many even find it necessary because it reveals, in a new way, the human side of Jesus, which has been part of the faith of the Christian community since the very beginning.

A great Catholic scholar, Joseph Fitzmyer, has quoted *Time* magazine approvingly, and I'd like to quote it to you today. "The churches have always taught that Jesus Christ

was a man as well as God, a man of a particular time and place, speaking a specific language, revealing his ways in terms of a specific cultural and religious tradition.” That is our subject. And because of the terms of the discussion, because we will be looking at the evidence as objectively as possible, people of all faiths, or no faith, can participate. And that’s one of the wonderful things about historical Jesus studies. It brings people together, regardless of their confessional perspective. Indeed, the various perspectives we bring to the task enrich the venture.

As for the gospel accounts, Fitzmyer also points out that there are three stages in the development of the gospel tradition. In stage one, we have what Jesus said and did in the first third of the first century. Stage two consists of what the disciples and the apostles taught and preached about what Jesus said and did. Stage three is the sequential narratives by the authors of the gospels, what they sifted out from the teachings of the disciples and apostles. Only stage three has been preserved. And this, in a sense, defines our problem. Starting from stage three, how do we get back to stage one, what Jesus said and did?

Today, three experts are going to lead us through the thickets of ancient texts, theology, archaeology, a little anthropology, the Nag Hammadi Codices and even the Dead Sea Scrolls. Our speakers are leading critical New Testament scholars who received their training at places as different as Harvard, Oxford, the National University of Ireland and the Pontifical Biblical Institute. One of our speakers, Marcus Borg, is the outgoing chairman of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature. Another, Dom Crossan, is the incoming chairman of the Historical Jesus Section. This reflects their eminence in the field as well as the judgment of their colleagues as to their professional standing.

Our first speaker is Professor Stephen Patterson, who teaches New Testament at the Eden Theological Seminary in Saint Louis. Steve has a master’s degree from Harvard and a doctorate from Claremont Graduate School in California. He is the author of *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* and co-author of *The Q-Thomas Reader*. He is a leading authority on Q, which, as you will hear in greater detail from him, is probably the earliest gospel and one that scholars are now excavating from ancient gospel texts.

Our second speaker is Marcus Borg, Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University. He received his doctorate from Oxford and did

postgraduate studies at the University of Tübingen. His book *Jesus, A New Vision*, which has been enormously influential, has gone through five hardback printings and three paperback printings. Marcus also has two new books coming out—*Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. He is outgoing chairman of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature. Marcus is also a New Testament columnist for *Bible Review*.

Marcus' successor as chairman of the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature is our third speaker, Professor John Dominic Crossan, professor of religious studies at DePaul University in Chicago. Professor Crossan was born in Ireland, as you will discover as soon as he opens his mouth. Dom received his doctorate from the National University of Ireland, and he has done postdoctoral studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and at the École Biblique in Jerusalem. He is the author of 13 books, the most recent of which is *The Historical Jesus*, which was reviewed on the front page of the *New York Times*. For a previous book, *The Cross That Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative*, Dom received the 1989 Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion from the American Academy of Religion. We could hardly have a more expert, diversified or exciting panel.

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**Hershel Shanks** (d. 2021) was the Editor of BAR and the founder of the Biblical Archaeology Society. He was a retired lawyer who still maintained his membership in the other BAR.

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